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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a longitudinal study of Eastern Massachusetts secondary students from two culturally diverse locations beginning in the fall of 1986 and ending with their high school graduations in 1991 and 1992. After discussing dropout prevention strategies, the paper offers the following justification for the study: By following these students over a protracted period, this research should be a significant step in disentangling the effects of sociocultural background, the sense of belonging or not belonging to a school, and the precipitating events on students' decisions to graduate or withdraw. (JAM)

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A LONGITUDINAL INVESTIGATION OF SCHOOL DROPOUTS: A WORKING PAPER

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Educational reform and academic excellence have become the bywords of the 1980's. As national and regional policy makers implement more comprehensive and demanding standards of academic achievement, one can ask what will happen to so called marginal students. Will they have the necessary classroom opportunities and learning experiences to successfully meet or surpass the proposed standards? Or, will they join the rising number of young people who withdraw before high school graduation? If the latter result occurs, recent efforts toward educational reform will have exacerbated the already serious school dropout problem.

Many urban high schools have experienced dropout rates of 40 to 50 percent (Ford Foundation Letter, 1984). Many of these early leavers belong to a racial or ethnic minority. For example, the National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics (1984;1,23) reported that dropout rates among Hispanic high school students reached 80% in New York City, 70% in Chicago, and 50% in Los Angeles.

Such high rates are a personal and national tragedy. On a personal level individuals without a high school diploma are twice as likely as graduates to be unemployed (Bachman, O'Malley, and Johnston 1978). For the nation, this means a major impediment to economic growth. The President's Commission on Industrial Competitiveness noted that blacks and Hispanics are 'the fastest-growing segment of the young worker population' and are 'the most likely to drop out of school and enter the workforce without critical basic skills' (Educational Week, March 13, 1985: 14).

Dropouts and School Retention

School dropouts can be viewed in several different ways. They may be "the proportion of a given group not enrolled in school and not high school

graduates" (Waggoner, 1984: II, 103). The focus here is upon the individuals who did not graduate.

An alternative approach emphasizes the power of schools to attract and retain students. From this viewpoint, dropouts are those non-transferring students who withdrew from school before graduation. In other words, the school's loss of pupils is the central concern.

By viewing individual decisions to leave within a specific school setting, we combine these perspectives on the problem.

Causes and Correlates of dropping out

Figure 1 is an heuristic model suggesting a network of causes and correlates of dropping out before high school graduation. Three major

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Figure 1 About Here

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sets of variables are presented. First, there are individual background variables. Poor English proficiency, Hipanic origins, and low socioeconomic status appear to increase the frequency of premature school-leaving (Steinberg, Blinde, and Chan; 1984). However, the independent contribution of each variable is unknown. It may be that socioeconomic status rather than Hispanic origins is the dominant factor. The educational literature shows that 25 to 50% of pupils from the lowest economic strata drop out compared to less than 5% of their peers from the most affluent homes (Bachman, Green, Wirtanen, 1971; Cervantes, 1965).

A second set of variables in the model are called "precipitators" of dropping out. Although frequently considered as causes, poor academic performance, hostile or indifferent attitudes toward school, and disruptive or delinquent behavior are viewed here as symptomatic of deeper personal, familyor school-related problems.

We know that at least half of all dropouts have academic averages of "D" or lower and have repeated a grade (Bachman, Green, and Wirtanen, 1971; Austin Independent School District 1982; and Los Angeles Unified School District 1974). Frequently, chronic absenteeism accompanies this poor academic record.

Such performance is likely correlated with general disinterest or, perhaps, hostility toward school. "Bored with school" and "disliked school" are the most frequent reasons given by dropouts for their decision to leave (Rock, Ekstrom, Goertz, and Pollack, 1985; Rumberger, 1983; and Greater Lowell Council for Children, 1975). Such boredom and hostility also can generate disruptive or even delinquent behavior (Elliott and Voss, 1974). The resulting suspension from school then becomes a precipitator of dropping out.

A major thrust of the present research is that school induced factors operate as intervening variables which can lessen or intensify individual predispositions to withdraw before high school graduation. Specifically, students placed in remedial instructional tracks are more likely to encounter low teacher expectations of academic success. Moreover, such tracks provide opportunities for peer friendships with negative school norms to emerge among similarly placed students. There becomes, in effect, little to attract or bind individuals to school. The lack of extra-curricular activities is an additional loosening factor.

Available research has not addressed all the components of the foregoing propositions. Rather studies of academic tracking and of dropout intervention

programs provide plausibility to our theoretical model.

With respect to tracking, teachers attribute higher pupil motivation and derive greater personal satisfaction with bright pupils in advanced courses (Finley, 1984). Since the majority of these students want to attend college, their efforts can pay off in terms of needed grades and recommendations. Conversely, a remedial or low-ability, general education class is less rewarding and motivating for both instructors and learners.

Although, pupil assignment to a general education track and to low ability classes cannot be shown conclusively to cause premature withdrawal from school, there is considerable circumstantial evidence to that effect. Dropouts largely populate general or vocational programs (Steinberg, Blinde, and Chan, 1984). These same students are likely to experience low standards of performance (McDill, Natriello, and Pallas, 1985). Interestingly enough, such low demands are correlated with high levels of pupil absenteeism, one of the precipitators of dropping out.In short, academic placement of students tends to establish a syndrome of failure and eventual school withdrawal.

Peer friendships and interests may fill a perceived void in relationships with school staff. Wehlage (1983) identified 30 students at Thoreau High who preferred drugs, parties and getting "high" to the indifferent treatment of many teachers. Basically they did not belong to the school so they developed their own norms and activities. Yet, we know that social bonds to the school and its mission are necessary for successful performance.

Extra curricula activities are an alternative vehicle to attract student support for at least the social amenities of attending school. Yet, dropouts rarely involve themselves in extra curricular activities (Bachman,1978; Cervantes, 1965; National School Public Relations Association, 1972).

Educational reports on dropout intervention programs show that the presence and assistance of caring adults can make a difference in student destination. Our review of such programs buttress the call of the National Commission of Secondary Education for Hispanics (1984) that school staff - teachers, guidance counselors, administrators etc. - provide close supportive relationships. Small classes with lots of teacher acceptance of and support for student efforts are essential ingredients to successful dropout intervention programs. Such positive reinforced learning is unlikely to occur in a large, impersonal, culturally diverse high school.

We shall consider the possibility that alternative school structures, e.g. a house system, and support services, e.g. guidance, bilingual education, etc.can reduce the harmful effects of size and impersonality. These structures and services can be a bridge between the language minority's culture and that of the host institution. They also can give students a sense of belonging, an indispensable tonic to stay in school.

Method

The research reported here is the beginning of a long term project to investigate and to intervene into the school dropout syndrome. Most studies and intervention programs are directed at high school youth. Yet, we know that prior academic and social experiences can predispose so-called marginal students to leave before graduation. With this in mind we shall begin in Fall, 1986, a six year study of selected 7th and 8th graders who should graduate from high school in 1991-92. They will be enrolled in large, culturally diverse schools in one, perhaps two, Eastern Massachusetts school districts.

Approximately 40 of these students will participate also in a dropout prevention program funded under Chapter 188 of the Massachusetts Public School Improvememt Act of 1985. The goal of this program is "to identify high risk students, stimulate them to participate in their own learning process and help them reach their personal, physical, and educational potential." Building upon successful implementation in another school district, it will do the following:

1. Build staff cohesiveness;
2. Allow teachers and students together to develop a needs analysis in math and English and to establish a time line for individual goals and objectives;
3. Encourage teachers to create innovative teaching techniqes;
4. Provide time for teachers to develop pedagogical strategies addressing the diverse talents of participants; and
5. Provide students with opportunities to produce concrete results from their education, e.g. a student newspaper, and receive recognition for their contributions, e.g. an awards banquet.

The program also includes an Outward Bound weekend, counseling about educational and career opportunities, field trips, and contacts with successful adult role models.

Instruction will take place at the University of Lowell during a preliminary weekend followed by successful segments of 10 Saturdays (for at least two academic years). Each teacher, assisted by a tutor, will direct classes of no more than ten pupils. Additionally, tutors will spend four hours per week assisting pupils during their regular classes.

Based upon attendance, course grades, and age, half of the participants will be identified as being high risk of dropping out. The other half will be non-risk students. Prior experience showed that the inclusion of non-risk students is beneficial, particularly for building mutual respect and caring among participants. As a result, a variety of student role models are present and the program does not become a "dumping ground" for "problem" boys and girls.

The number of student participants may very well expand to 100. Control groups will be drawn from 7th and 8th grade students enrolled in September 1986 at one of the chosen district schools. Ideally, one control group would include non-participants at the school where program subjects are being drawn. Another control group would represent high risk and non-risk students at other schools. For purposes of the proposed study, random matching procedures will be followed.

Variable measures will be developed from several sources. School records contain information on family background, English proficiency, instructional tracking, academic performance (i.e. grades, retention, and absences), and discipline problems. Periodic administration of a survey will address peer norms and ties as well as general interest or disinterest in school. Ultimately, the decision to graduate from high school or to leave without a diploma becomes the major dependent variable.

In order to supplement school records, I plan to interview at least a subsample of program participants and non-participants who dropped out of school. They can provide valuable insights into the causes and correlates of their decision.

This paper proposes a longitudinal study beginning in the Fall of 1986 and ending with the high school graduations of 1991 and 1992. By following these students over a protracted period of time, this study should be a significant step in disentangling the effects of background, sense of belonging or not belonging to school, and precipitating events on student decisions to graduate or to withdraw.

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Figure 1. Potential Causes and Correlates of Dropping Out

BACKGROUND	LACK OF BELONGING TO SCHOOL AND ITS MISSION	PRECIPITATORS	DECISION
Family Background Low SES Ethnicity - Hispanic Poor English Proficiency	Instructional Tracking and Low Staff Expectations	Boredom / Disinterest with School	
	Hostile Peer Ties and Norms	Performance: Low GPA Grade Retention Excessive Absences	Dropout before H.S. Graduation
	Lack of Extacurricula Activities		
		Behavior in School: Disruptive or Delinquent	